






ISSN 2735-7139

nuestrAmérica. j. soc. res., 2024, continuous publication, e12789128
Published in HTML, PDF, and XML. To cite, use this persistent link https://nuestramerica.cl/id:e12789128
Deposited on Zenodo: https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.12789128

Received: March 9, 2024
Accepted: July 15, 2024
Published: July 20, 2024

Towards an aesthetics of South-realist art

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Abstract: As part of the philosophical system developed by Enrique Dussel, his aesthetic ideas can be found scattered throughout his reflections, albeit not always explicitly stated. In the latter stage of his thought, the scholar developed hypotheses for an Aesthetics of Liberation, from which emerges the current proposal—an analysis aimed at contemplating art from the Global South based on its own needs, in response to the dominance of a Eurocentric art aesthetic.

Keywords: aesthetics, sensibility, art, South, south-realism.

* This translation was made using artificial intelligence and human review. All quotations were translated to maintain idiomatic continuity in the reading. The quotations used in this document are not official translations. The text is originally written in Spanish. This translation was published alongside the original language version.

To contemplate an aesthetic of surrealist art, it is necessary to refer to some theoretical proposals related to the arts that manifest the need of Latin American thought and art to develop a new language that would allow the presentation of authentic ideas, distinct from old strategies and failed transformation attempts that, arising from colonialist logic, would achieve nothing more than superficial changes, fundamentally entrenched in the same neocolonial path.[1] The revolutionary promises sponsored by this colonialist apparatus have proven quite costly. This new language would

[1] The artworks of the period in Latin America cannot be contained in a simple statement; therefore, some examples will be provided later that serve as the reverse of that statement. However, it can be said that the search for an expression specific to that period resulted in a certain exoticism that moved away from a liberating or emancipatory attitude. On the contrary, it was assumed — as still happens today — as a correspondence with the foreign imagery of the wild artisan who could only be integrated into the art world by adhering to that imagery. Thus, even the most revolutionary spirits fell into the trap of an authentic art that was, in reality, complacent with an excluding system: that of the Fine Arts — European, moreover — which could be read as a transition from colonialism to neocolonialism.

enable the creation of a revolutionary art, both political and poetic,[2] to foster ideas that transform consciousness, aiming to break free from the domination of cultural machinery.

The search is then for the path to praxis: "politics as a form of poetry [...] poetry is a revolutionary praxis [...] revolution is an aesthetic" (Rocha, in Avellar 2002, 152). For him, the key to transformation lies in cinema, which is why he envisioned this new language as Neosurrealism; the expression Glauber Rocha dreamed of for Latin America is neo-surrealism: neosurrealism of the South. Following the Brazilian's thought, I consider the need for a readjustment of the concept to a mere surrealism, as the prefix "neo" would imply a preceding state that has presumably been overcome. Nevertheless, the expression of surrealist art has continued to be constructed for just over five decades around the liberation movements that emerged in what was then called the Third World.

This proposal seeks a possible departure from hegemonic canons of artistic expression, beyond those that offer limited critical possibilities. Similarly, it aims for the images to require the viewer to engage in a reflective exercise, as they are not exactly digestible,[3] although they should provide a minimal code of understanding.

Surrealism does not refer to art becoming a mere mimesis of reality; otherwise, the reproduction of reality would nullify the poetic qualities of creation. In this case, realism is not necessarily about form, but rather about the place of enunciation that emerges with poiesis, or from the creation of a work, which enables it to have content grounded in its reality and critical of it. "This critical attitude of trying to have the highest possible degree of reflexivity about the 'place' from which the discourse is enunciated (the locus enuntiationis) should be maintained as a permanent position" (Dussel 2007, 15). Narratives that aim to show an obscene reality, that is, as if trying to reproduce reality, will remain in signifying partiality; in the preliminary words of his work *Los muros de agua*, José Revueltas mentions the concept of literary reality or imagined reality:

> [...] reality always turns out to be a little more fantastic than literature, as Dostoevsky already asserted. This will always be the problem for the writer: reality taken literally is not always plausible, or worse, is almost never plausible. It mocks us, it "makes us lose our mind" (as the people so wonderfully express with this word of prodigious precision), it makes us lose our composure because it does not adhere to the rules; it is the writer who must establish them. (Revueltas 2014, 9)

Thus, thinking and feeling reality through art is not a journalistic documentary exercise; on the contrary, it requires the artist to make a greater effort in expressing life without falling into everyday storytelling. The most terrible things are sometimes more immediate, they can be quotidian — like hunger — and because they are present, they become more simply incommunicable. That is why the person representing it must set the rules, not to escape from reality, but to provide evidence of what has been made invisible. Hence, the violence is accentuated, which, in fact, is less terrible than the suffering of hunger in the body.[4]

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[2] That is, in the freest possible form of creation, overcoming the stereotypes of the avant-gardes and the techniques governed by the European modern axis, without renouncing one's own school, as long as it generated its own creative characteristics.

[3] Expression of Glauber Rocha, which designates a cinema — or art in general — that offers no complexity to its audience and therefore aims to keep them passive, as mere spectators, that is, it does not invite them to participate.

[4] An aesthetic object intended to challenge its viewer would have the potential to bring them closer to the sensations that, as the case may be, are experienced. In this case, dealing with an aesthetics of suffering that seeks to sensitize the subject through rather unsubtle and unorthodox means, some

Impertinence, anticonformity, violence, and rebellion will be the raw materials of a free gaze that seeks to create art of interrogation; otherwise, the author will merely repeat systems, techniques, and choreographies that will function as means for the persistence and development of bourgeois morality, being mere disciplined employees of the system who only change characters and settings in each production. "The author is the greatest responsible for the truth: his aesthetics is an ethics, his mise en scène is a politics" (Rocha, in Avellar 2002, 152). Therefore, what is sought is an aesthetics that privileges politics and ethics, not as a duty, but as a resource for the emancipation of the subject, who should have the possibility of generating their own living conditions, beyond the legality of the current system.

Art should not fall into the absurdity of repeating foreign models, nor into the meaninglessness of fragmented localism; it must be situated in its context but be able to look globally. The creator who is situated in the underdeveloped world has the revolutionary commitment to creation in terms of transformation; they must be multidimensional and impact both art and politics. Otherwise, their practice would be oriented solely toward traditional dynamics of colonial expression, which influence the formulation of a rootless taste, culturally distancing from emancipation and condemning, not only the artist but also their audience, to the obedient subsumption of contemplation.

Frantz Fanon's assertion has resonated strongly from the second half of the last century to the present day: "Every spectator is a coward or a traitor" (Fanon 2007, 182). The artistic expression that resonates from the South is inscribed in the path that the compass of the author of *The Wretched of the Earth* bequeathed to us through his ideas, as it is the same that the creators of decolonial art possess, where the spectator is seen as the most important piece of its poetics, for it is in them that the final development of the work is inscribed. "One must consider these political, economic, and cultural moments of liberation as the end of a process that is also philosophical and the birth of a philosophy that, along with praxis, justifies this emancipatory age of colonialism" (Dussel 2015, 91).

Octavio Getino and Fernando Solanas,[5] with the aim of constructing a new cinematic model, had in mind a cinema-act that would serve a function beyond its projection. The project was called Third Cinema, and its creators were the Grupo Cine Liberación, who saw the projection of a film as a revolutionary political act, in the interest of discussion and dialogue.

The neocolonized people are nothing more than spectators of their own misery and devastation; they do not own the land they tread, nor their ideas. As long as the people continue to accept their situation as neocolonized, they will hardly transcend this condition that denies them life. For the system, it is therefore important to keep education and media under its colonial control. Sensibility subsumed to the colonial imperative of taste promotes culturally distant ideals of beauty, which, functioning as a duty, even jeopardize life itself; it is when sensibility is liberated that the sense of beauty gains its rightful dimension.

level of stridency and discomfort is expected in the face of the grotesque, sad, or painful expression of death, which goes beyond the lightness of any piece of art that falls under the regime of relative indifference to the suffering of others. This is because, besides being deaf to their lament, it does not seek to challenge anyone but rather seeks recognition within the corresponding institutional values.

[5] Argentinian filmmakers and developers of the Cine Liberación movement.

> This sense is constituted by the phenomenological position of the subject before the object, which is interpreted as available for life, causing in the subject an enthusiastic admiration, a joy at continuing to live, a discovery of a mediation that can be wielded to achieve the end of life. (Dussel 2020, 144)

Colonized taste — the so-called good taste — is a channel of control over consciences because it castrates the subject's creativity and distances them from any political consideration. Art as abstraction and as revolution — within the institution that validates it — are sterile elements. The idea that beauty in itself is revolutionary caricatures the very idea of revolution, so that any author can consider their revolutionary quota fulfilled by any expression. But the issue is not to produce weak resistance because it is consumed by the system and presented as part of the criticism that the system itself allows; on the contrary, its revolutionary values must be strongly cemented.

> Inserting the work as an original fact in the process of liberation, placing it in terms of life rather than art, dissolving aesthetics into social life, these and not others are, in our view, the sources from which, as Fanon would say, decolonization will be possible, that is, culture, cinema, beauty, and most importantly to us, our culture, our cinema, and our sense of beauty. (Getino-Solanas in AAVV 1988, 38)

Neocolonial art dominates through aestheticocide,[6] Dussel argues; the dominated are thus subjected to being barbaric, savage, and ugly. Their customs are ugly and their forms are as well. One of the most effective ways to dominate a people is by erasing their memory and directing their sensibility towards desires that contribute to the means required by the dominator to continue strengthening themselves. This means that coloniality also introduces itself internally through members of a community, like a virus that transforms their desires and needs in favor of those of the oppressor, as shown by Jorge Sanjinés in his film *Lloksy Kaymanta* (1977), where members of an Aymara group start to conflict internally and no longer perform the minga,[7] as the seduction of progress has led some to abandon their spirit of collective work and communal space; it is more seductive to work in the mine and enter the world of supply, demand, and selfishness.

An obedient aesthetics is needed, as Dussel would express, that serves the oppressed people and develops around their own construction. In this regard, the philosopher thinks: "Modernity has deprived colonial peoples of their self-expression capacity, and in aesthetic coloniality, what is unique to each of them has been concealed and a supposedly global, Western, and Eurocentric aesthetics has been exalted" (Dussel 2020, 167).

If popular culture is the opposition to imperial culture, it means that it has resisted the impacts of massification that result from the hijacking of sensibility through the simplification of taste. It is important to mention what I will here call "fallacies of modern aesthetics": these are the concepts of good taste, high culture, creative genius, and Fine Arts. All these concepts are based on an elitist construction that dictates who can create and who must renounce this type of work. Good taste is limited and has only embraced a few; these elites who enjoy privileged sensitivity are the ones who constitute the sets of high culture, who can distinguish between fine arts and lesser arts, or those

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[6] This expression originates from the term used by Boaventura de Sousa Santos: "epistemicide", adapting it to the context of this aesthetic reflection, as it can be understood as a performance extending to different areas.

[7] It refers to a community work that is simultaneously a form of communal living, aimed at achieving common welfare. It is akin to a ritual, festive, and laborious act, making it complex and possessing a sensitive nature of creating and sharing within the communal "we."

that do not even achieve this status, such as the undervalued crafts arising from the expression of the fourth world, that is, the indigenous world.

However, despite the brazen presumption of these fallacies, academic circles and artistic circuits still consider them as canonical truths of sensitive expression, just as the conception of the uselessness of art ensured that such expressions did not translate into means of liberation or affirmation for oppressed peoples. "We must now theoretically distinguish the aesthetic moment from the merely productive; but, immediately after, we must reintegrate the aesthetic moment into the productive world as a work of art, or as any useful, instrument, or aesthetically created commodity" (Dussel 2020, 151). Accepting these canons would be akin to accepting that creative capacity and sensitivity can only be developed by certain authorities in the field who can recognize beauty without further ado, dictating what can and cannot be part of artistic expression, which, under the guise of art purism, has distanced revolutionary discourses from an art for life.

Thus, not enjoying a piece of contemporary art that is foreign to one's own taste parameters condemns the individual to remain in the darkness of bad taste, with no possibility of participating in great masterpieces, which breaks their sensitive spirit into a form of acceptance of their low cultural status, as if there were a diktat of sensibility that set the beat of what should or should not please.

This is why I refer here to a sur-realism as an expression of the South, that is, as a poetic and sensitive parameter that seeks to address the needs of decolonization and not to a surrealism that, following Benjamin (2014), seeks to add the forces of intoxication to the revolution; however, from hunger and colonization, as our places of enunciation, the reverie of surrealism does not allow us to develop with the full radical potential of the act of decolonization, as adopting it as a liberating expression would be to fall again into merely foreign expression as a banner of liberation, a formula that we have already seen fail.

The potential of art, which has been domesticated, has been reduced to its standardization with respect to style, as well as a basic idea of the supposed good taste that should prevail around any work, so that the consumer is merely a passive spectator and is not encouraged to use their capacity as a collaborator in the narrative; they can only listen and observe, contemplating that object for which they were made as a consumer and not the other way around.[8]

But in the surrealist stage of art, there is no room for passivity or innocence; the intellectual must go further and engage in acts of liberation, aligning their actions with those of workers on strike, with students who mobilize to protest risking their education, with militants who are tortured and do not betray their comrades. Therefore, it is necessary to move to an expression committed to the truth, placing the issue of resources, though necessary, in the background, with the primary focus being the liberation of alienated and oppressed subjects, the overcoming of neocolonial anesthesia[9]. This art knows that the battle against institutionalized art is lost in advance; it is not about competing against it, but about serving in the global process of liberation.

[8] Under market logic, audiences are now created to fit the works rather than works being created for diverse audiences.

[9] I am referring to a desensitization that the media have developed through the superexposure to spectacle, large format, and excess, in order to be perceived.

The example of cinema-acto showed us that each projection created a liberated space, a decolonized territory. This is a political act in which the people can hear and speak, "I am convinced that the function of the artist, of the creator, of the discoverer, is to open new perspectives on life, on the relationship we have with life, with everything creative" (Solanas 1989, 229). The film thus takes a secondary role, as it is no longer the most important thing because the dialogue is developing. If such dialogue does not occur, one might think that the mere projection has no meaning, as the act is not being carried out and the liberation of the mere spectator is not happening.

The audience became actors from the moment they decided to attend a projection that involved transgressing laws and even a possible tragic fate, risking their own lives. The space liberated after the film hosted debates, performances, poetry readings, music, wine, and shared mate. There it was understood that the most valuable thing is the participating companion who becomes an accomplice in this call. It is also recognized as valuable the free space that allowed for the exposition of concerns and discussions, of which the film was merely the trigger that ignited the praxis.

Sur-realistic art is an art-act, an unfinished action that seeks to complete itself in its historical process of liberation. The liberated artist realizes that within the system there is no room, but outside there is room for everything because everything is yet to be done.

> We are aware that with a film, just as with a novel, a painting, or a book, we do not liberate our homeland, but neither do a strike, a mobilization, or an act of arms, as isolated acts. Each of these, or the militant cinematographic work, are forms of action within the battle currently being fought. The effectiveness of one or the other cannot be preemptively assessed but through its own praxis. It will be the qualitative and quantitative development of both that will contribute, to a greater or lesser degree, to the realization of a culture and a cinema that are fully decolonized and original. At the limit, we can say that a cinematographic work can become a formidable political act, just as a political act can be the most beautiful artistic work: contributing to the total liberation of man. (Getino-Solanas in AAVV 1988, 62)

South-realistic art seeks to represent the anti-imperialist struggle of the Third World peoples and is based on a poetics that is constructed from the recognition of one's own culture, in a function of destruction-construction. It emerges from the people themselves and aims to transcend the figure of the spectator to become a spect-actor (Boal 2002); the mechanisms of diffusion and exhibition emerge from this same people, it is not an art of contemplation, but an art of action, thus recovering the popular aspects lost by institutionalized art.

The action must relate to one's own life, not only in terms of putting it at risk but of offering it to others as a revolutionary and transformative act, because only by showing oneself can one transform; sharing is the possibility of revealing one's own alienation. It is important that artists also contribute to the battle for the decolonization of taste in favor of life, because as the Grupo Cine Liberación mentions: the dominant culture is not ours, we merely suffer from it. "The dissemination of our [art] in global markets does not depend on its cultural, technical, or expressive validity, but on the existing power relations between various socioeconomic spaces" (Getino 1990, 204). This is why Latin American art will face more obstacles in reaching its audience, as it has been culturally dominated by imperial productions, thus style and desires have been created by the cultural industry.

According to Benjamin, misery has become an object of consumption, that is, it has turned into an object of enjoyment; it could be said that taste has been restricted to the artistic institutional imposition and the atrocity contained in the images of the aesthetics of hunger and violence, with their gallery of the hungry, have lost their true meaning, "What we should demand from the photographer is the possibility of giving their plate a caption capable of removing it from the fashion consumption and granting it a revolutionary use value" (Benjamin 2004, 42). But the struggle against misery has also become an object of consumption, so, as Benjamin points out, the very problem I have been referring to: when the public falls into a spectator-consumer relationship, they adopt any type of expression without any filter, and do not even feel entitled to make any distinction between what they like and what they do not like.

In turn, those who develop these kinds of expressions are no longer creators but servants, they do not create a discourse but collaborate in the fetishistic development of a chapel—a branch of a Eurocentric discourse—and do not develop a school but a fashion. Art that creates spectators is of no use, no matter how high its technical quality, "the best opinion can be useless if it does not make those who share it useful" (Benjamin 2004, 49). The spectator, in addition to being able to express the same opinion about any piece, if it has been offered as a supreme work, does not engage in questioning but in contemplation, based on parameters that are not their own, as it is about generating their own resources in relation to aesthetic objects and life.

We ignore that every day we act, everyone does, however, not everyone transforms reality because, among other things, our education has detached us from the knowledge of our transformative capacities. For Augusto Boal, «all human beings are actors, because they act, and spectators, because they observe. We are all spect-actors» (2015, 21). However, this does not mean that we do so freely, that is, as liberated subjects. Intellectuals who have been educated under a foreign tradition considered superior to one's own situated thought do not generate resources that help address their own reality, just as artists obsessed with European traditions often adapt pre-existing discourses and make some modifications.

Acting or observing is of no use if it is not to liberate oneself or as a free act, since as a colonized person, it means an act of servitude; those who observe their own exploitation and do not intervene provide an opportunity for plunder. It could then be said that art that does not emancipate is also not emancipated; the work and its spectator/a are merely fulfilling a desirable cycle in a closed system that offers discourses expecting the same responses. If, as Boal thinks, art is made by the dominant classes, the people should not remain in the role of spectator/a, «“Spectator,” what a bad word! The spectator is less than a man and must be humanized and restored to their full capacity for action» (Boal 2015, 67).

Regarding Aristotle’s poetics, Boal mentions that dramatic action substitutes real action, while within the poetics of the German playwright Bertolt Brecht, the audience already thinks for itself and not through actors, but the spectator still delegates actions to them. Sur-realism, on the other hand, no longer delegates power to characters, neither to think for them nor to act for them; the spectator thinks and acts for themselves, and this itself is a model of action that can later strengthen their everyday life. Thus, art may not be revolutionary by itself, but it is a rehearsal for revolution.

If we revisit Fanon's initial idea, it could be said that «every colonized person is a coward or a traitor», so one must distinguish between those who enjoy minimal resources while knowing they are colonized and contribute to the mechanism of colonization, and those who are unaware of their possibilities for liberation, that is, those who are alienated by an anesthetic. From the possibilities glimpsed over half a century in some artistic movements in Latin America, there are possibilities for a sur-realist art that can contribute to a revolutionary praxis for the liberation of the condemned of the earth. A sur-realism, as a cry emerging from the exteriority and critically noticed, seeks to address the blind and the deaf and, in general, those who have been stripped of their own sensitivity, «Exteriority manifests in the system as a transcendentality that is not entirely defined from and by the totality; there is a residual work that the system not only cannot absorb but denies, alienates, represses» (Dussel 2011, 209).

To achieve a sur-realist art, one must prioritize a sensitive model that goes beyond the conventional aesthetics of Fine Arts, as if in this case we were probing the depths of ugliness: the lament, the suffering, and the non-white, among other things, to awaken a sensitivity that had been anesthetized, so that we can allow ourselves to experience the world beyond basic models, understand ourselves as part of diversity, and build from this a "we" that makes us part of something deeper than the seemingly common.

Undoubtedly, this text is far from serving as a consummate manifesto, because the subject of the arts is too broad and multifaceted, which is why I decided to explore its aesthetic form, starting in an unorthodox manner from cinematic parameters,[10] as an invitation to subsequently think about other types of expressions that compose the vast universe of artistic poiesis, from architecture to graffiti, including music and painting. Thus, the lines shared here are merely an invitation to think, starting from a critique of one's own sensitivity, about the possibilities of recognizing and creating an art that turns around the institutional formats suited to a Necropolitics (Mbembe 2006), supported by a necro-aesthetic sensitivity (Quezada 2016), that continues to reproduce the system of hunger and disease, in order to turn the gaze to the diverse South and develop the breadth of creative and inclusive possibilities, which prioritize the same material principle of Liberation Philosophy. A consciousness that does not develop its sensitivity deeply cannot have respect for the production, reproduction, and development of life.

[10] As a historical reconstruction of art is not being undertaken, I decided to address the issue from one of its most popular and problematic angles, given its breadth and mobility, between art and industry and its dispute between art and non-art. It involves thinking from our place and moment of enunciation and from there moving on to critique what we commonly understand as art and beauty.

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Biodata

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